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ABSTRACT

Although cheating is reportedly endemic in colleges, the honor system is believed to have reduced its incidence. Cheating in a graduate, clinical psychology training program touches serious fundamental issues with academic, ethical, intrapersonal, interpersonal, and professional implications. The responsibility of the teacher is to respond reasonably and effectively to serve the students, the university community, and the public. A humanistic and responsible approach provides an atmosphere in which the students can make amends while learning about the therapeutic role and environment through their experience. In order to illustrate a psychotherapeutic approach to such a breach of ethics, this paper presents a case study in which two women graduate students were involved in cheating on a take home final examination in clinical psychology. After two meetings with the professor, the woman who allowed her examination to be copied wrote a paper on professional ethics as her requirement for closing the breach. The woman who copied the examination studied limit setting as it applied to herself. Both women found the experience beneficial to their moral and professional development and may have gained something from their own experience toward understanding what psychotherapeutic acceptance is about. (BL)

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Cheating, Ethics and the Student of Professional Psychology: A Case Study

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Cheating, Ethics and the Student of Professional Psychology:

A Case Study

One day in June, I received a telephone call from my senior teaching assistant notifying me of a case of cheating by two graduate students on the take home final. I thanked him for the information and sent along the anonymous materials to the other teaching assistant for a second opinion. She reached the identical conclusion - that there had been a violation of the honor system by two of my graduate students in clinical psychology. I was shocked (out of touch?), angry, and concerned simultaneously. As a relatively new faculty member, the situation was unfamiliar to me. I consulted colleagues to learn from their experiences, to determine what the University procedures were, and mulled over alternative ways of responding. The issues that were involved, the dilemmas confronted, and my own solution are the focus of todays presentation.

By way of background, there is widespread agreement that cheating in college is endemic, with reports of 50, 60 and 75 percent reported in the literature (Hetherton & Feldman, 1964; Baird, 1980). Analysis of the ways in which students cheat, their motives, and the situational and personality factors that enter in to the process have been discussed in the literature. These indicate that we are dealing with a multivariate phenomenon comprising varied determinants (Nevo, 1981). The nonor system is widely believed to reduce cheating and the studies that have examined the system have demonstrated a significant reduction in cheating

behavior (Canning, 1956). Unfortunately, there is little clarifying information on the situational and personality factors operant in cheating under honor conditions. Similarly, the absence of data on the phenomena during graduate training further circumscribes the value of the published material in the area of cheating and non-ethical behavior. My assumption is, however, that cheating in graduate school is not normative, particularly when the classes are small, faculty-student contact is frequent, and the honor system is instituted by the instructor as a significant parameter of the educational relationship. Thus, when cheating does occur, it is a matter to view with serious concern.

Faculty reactions to the violation of the honor system by students vary considerably. For some, it seems that irrespective of the motivating source of the violation, the students should be summarily expelled. In a field where temptations and potential for abuse of the psychologist mantle are all too apparent, there is a need for firm action to protect ethical standards. Recent surveys of the sexual liasons between therapist and patient are among the more dramatic but not the only professional hazard in the field (Davidson, 1977). Others will argue that every effort should be made to assist the students complete the program with a supportive and tolerant stance. Concerned with the student as humanistically perceived colleague, consumer, and client,one does not disown the student for errors in judgement. Instead, supportive contacts, opportunities to make good the failure, and a general non-judgemental stance are advocated. While these positions

are set forth at their extremes, they represent positions debated within broad society with regard to the violation of ethical and legal standards. The implications following the adoption of either approach within a graduate training program, are significant. The moral standards adopted by a training program no less than the level of tolerance communicated serve a teaching and modeling function.

Thus the breach of the honor system touched upon fundamental issues within the academic, ethical, intrapersonal, interpersonal and professional realms. The responsibility of the teacher is to respond reasonably and effectively to serve the students, the university community, and the general public. Before a final decision could be made, more information which only the students could provide was necessary. Seeking to learn whether psychopathy, rebellion, or personal difficulties were operant, I was ultimately seeking to chart a humanistic and profesionally responsible course to follow. I wished to neglect neither the students as people nor the needs of society which has entrusted the training of professional psychologists to our programs.

Unable to reach the students prior to my trip abroad, I invited them in for individual meetings upon my return. In the meantime, a number of alternatives suggested themselves. Among the more severe -- a permanent incomplete or failure in the course -- indicating that the student was someone whom I refused to support become a professional psychologist because of character deficiencies. If the student was someone whom I could support, a number of options would become available. The final form would be determined in discussion with the students.

The Case

The students, Debby and Felice*were each to meet with the instructor two times. Debby was the first to arrange a meeting and arrived determined to shoulder full responsibility for what had happened. She informed me that she had undergone a difficult semester and had been at the verge of drastic action. It was only help from Felice that had enabled her to manage the strain of functioning and meeting academic requirements. Her suicidal concerns had been mitigated by much support from and dependence upon Felice. It seemed self-explanatory to Debby that she had become so emotionally dependent upon Felice and she did not question the course of her actions. In discussion with her faculty counselor, the issue of psychotherapy had been discussed but she had not accepted the suggestion. In fact, she continued to consider whether she wished to return to school to complete the program. As she spoke, particularly missing was a sense of emotional depth -- of depression or guilt. The rationalization, emotional distance and general indecision she conveyed made it very difficult to respond beyond a general empathy with her difficulty and isolation in the face of such difficult feelings.

Deciding not to minimize her current impasse, I did not seek to reach any immediate resolution with her. I told her that the question of what to do with the course requirement - as well as the ethical breach - needed to wait until she was feeling better and had come to a decision about staying in the program. At a more personal level, I added that her reluctance to enter therapy left her blocked and with questions --

*Fictitious names

but simultaneously, her reluctance protected her from confronting scary and painful feelings within herself. The resultant standoff kept her from being close to herself and kept me at a distance as well. I hoped when she was ready to deal with some of her difficulties that we would also be able to put together a satisfactory completion to the course if that would be what she wanted. We said goodbye and Debby left with things unresolved and with the tension that entailed. How she would respond was up to her.

Felice arrived for her meeting in a very different state. She burst forth in a torrent of "explanation". She too described the difficulty that Debby had experienced and her own gradual evolution from friend into confidant-supporter-therapist. Felice bared her soul and shared the confusion and responsibility she had assumed. These had led her to seek out therapy for herself. With eyes downcast, she asked the instructors pardon for violating his honor system and for letting Debby copy her independent work under the conditions of being responsible for her friend.

Acknowledging the pressures that Felice had been under, I empathized with what a confusing period that must have been for her. As things were beginning to sort themselves out, I thought that it made sense to meet again to finalize how she might complete the course. Felice's eyes opened wide as she gasped out "But I didn't copy, she did!" Her confessional tone changed to one of choking rage as she coldly informed the instructor that the perogative was all his. "Why did I tell you all this anyway? You are going to do whatever you wish." Agreeing to meet a second time, Felice left without saying goodbye.

In the second meeting, I began by describing my reaction to the honor code violation - the shock and the concern - and my question as to whether to assist the still anonomous violators the opportunity to complete my course. Only in listening to Debby and Felice did I learn enough to determine that I was interested in working with them to complete the course. Felice listened carefully to this and replied that she had attempted to maintain her anger and hate towards the instructor but had been unable to do so. It had been her original expectation that sharing the very personal information she did would have made up the breach of the honor code. She had been expecting understanding -- forgiveness -- from a clinical psychologist. "Yet I think there is less bullshit in your way of dealing with it. What do you have in mind for the course make-up?" I answered that I accepted her contention that she had done her own work on the final and saw no reason for her to repeat that. Yet her sharing of her work had been a fracture in the framework of her relationship to the program which needed to be addressed. I wondered if writing a paper on professional ethics, on a topic of her own choosing, might not be an appropriate manner of closing the breach. When complete, her original grade on the final would stand.

Taking a moment to agree, Felice acknowledged that the suggestion made sense to her. She then related a story from her own work as a counselor prior to graduate school. "I don't know how this is related" she began, and then described counseling relationship with a student whom she had trusted and liked. Having caught him, however, in a lie

to her had broken their working alliance. No longer able to work with him, she severed all contact and put it out of her mind. "The difference between how you responded and I responded was that I didn't leave him a way to either understand or work things out." The comment was apt for how to maintain the ability to work together and heal breaches of trust was an important part of a sustained relationship and I told her so. Felice handed in a paper entitled "Professional Ethics: Sexual Contact between Patient and Therapist--A Critical Discussion." The product of both library work and serious thought, it set a tone that praised psychology for its willingness to address such problems while acknowledging the seriousness of the violation itself. The parallel she drew between instructor-student sexual contact and therapist-patient sex raised anew the issue of modeling during the training program - but she did not go on to develop this theme. Felice added that confronting ethical issues had been valuable for her, and that the manner in which we had done so had been a learning experience for her.

Another few weeks passed before Debby made her decisions to continue in the program, not to enter therapy and to complete the course. She returned for a meeting with me aware of what had transpired between Felice and myself. While it was clear to the two of us that she needed to take another final examination, the ethical violation in her case needed to be addressed too. As we talked, with Debby not seriously evaluating her behavior, I wondered aloud whether in her case a

theoretical paper on an ethical issue might not be missing the point. Pressed for an alternative, I offered in its stead, a combined case study and theoretical paper evaluating the dilemmas in limit setting--with herself as the case illustration. Pros and cons could be discussed in detail. This paper would neither be graded nor read by the instructor. It would be sufficient for her to complete it and hand in the reference page alone. When completed, we would select a date for the final. As Debby left, she turned and said "I think this paper is a substitute for a dialogue that I have not had with myself yet and that I have not had in here, in part because you think I need to take this stuff into therapy. Thank you". Two weeks later I found the references in my mail box. While not fully satisfied with where Debby was, I did not believe that the circumstances warranted her dismissal from the program, and went with that decision.

Discussion

Let us ask ourselves, what are the basic elements in this case? Two students violated an honor system to breach trust vis a vis the instructor, the University and their colleagues. A type of almost victimless cheating (standing in marked contrast to falsification of research or clinical data which threatens the scientific enterprise), the implications of the ethical violation cannot be dismissed lightly. The faculty response attempted to balance concern for the maintenance of ethical standards in the profession with the interpersonal caring characteristic of the helping professors.

In discussing the process of psychotherapy supervision Ekstein and Wallerstein (1972) set forth a "parallel process" model. They emphasized that the processes at work between supervisor and therapist greatly influence the work of therapist and patient. Much of the emotional climate of one relationship is paralleled within the other and interventions within one relationship have implications for the other (Doehrman, 1976). To those of us who acknowledge that the faculty-student relationship is a potent model for the student in the role of therapist, the concept of parallel process can be quite useful. That is, the extent to which both professional standards and interpersonal concerns, are operant between faculty and student will have implications for how the student will operate in the role of professional.

The cheating required a response. I chose to address the honor violation at its most immediate level as the violation of a personal contract with me. I sought to learn if the students were individuals with whom I was willing to continue in a relationship involving trust. To decide, the students ability to assume responsibility for their actions was important, and anything that weakened that responsibility was cause for concern. Whether to allow the students to complete the course touched upon whether to encourage their continuation in the program. What had been at the forefront of the acceptance of all students -- that they not be harmful, that they be capable of shouldering the responsibility of the tasks ahead, and that they have the capacity for meaningful human relationships -- returned again for fresh consideration (Grayson, 1982).

The personal explanations that I received clarified that Debby and Felice were not indifferent to ethical standards of behavior. On that score I was reassured, although not satisfied.

If an ethical breach is a serious matter, it warrants repair in its own right. Explanation alone may not be sufficiently reparative. Furthermore, a requirement addressing the honor breach set up a situation where something corrective could be done to close and work through the breach. The opportunity to learn from the experience in an experiential-didactic way changed the context of the events as well. In grappling and responding to the events, the participants had addressed together an area where ethics, interpersonal relationships, and training met.

A little on responding to the students. In preferring to leave Debby without closure at the first setting, I sought to respond to her emotional difficulties as potent, but not as substitutes for her fulfilling her responsibilities towards myself and the course. Had she chosen not to continue in the program, I would have allowed her temporary incomplete to turn into a permanent one but would have met with her again. I preferred not to adopt the position of acting, deciding, or feeling in her stead -- experiencing those latter responses as a characteristic induction of Debby's interpersonal style. For that reason as well, I recommended a self contained debate whereby she could explore her actions and consider on her own, how they should be responded to.

With Felice, the situation was somewhat different. Her shock and anger at discovering that her "confession" had not righted the balance

was understandable -- but by no means self evident. By requiring a special task focused on ethics here, the ethical dimension was heightened in the short and hopefully long run (Dienstbier et al., 1980).

The instructor's measured approach, seeking to allow repair of the ethical and interpersonal breach, communicated my faith in the ability of a bipersonal framework to tolerate shock and continue to function. That this was communicated is particularly well illustrated by Felice's spontaneous sharing of her own experience. Unable to continue in a helping relationship with one of her counsellees following a breach of trust, her contrasting this with how the instructor responded to her showed that learning had occurred.

Epilogue: I have had both students in a second year therapy course and have been able to assess the impact of this experience on our relationship.

Importantly, the experience has been beneficial to their understanding of how I practice therapy. This approach is one that emphasizes mutuality vis a vis the other, a stance taking responsibility as therapist, an ability to tolerate strong emotion in the interaction, and a viewpoint that allows for reparation, rather than forgiveness or punishment. For Debby and Felice, the distinction between the academic and clinical worlds is less sharp, and they have used something of their own experience to understand what psychotherapeutic acceptance is about.

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